All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

NEWS RELEASE

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Cross-party group welcomes entry into force of Precision Breeding Act in England

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture (APPGSTA) has welcomed the entry into force today (13 November) of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 for plants in England, describing it as a landmark moment for British science, and calling for this to mark the beginning of a new, pro-innovation agricultural policy agenda for the UK.

The cross-party Group - which brings together MPs, Peers and stakeholders from the food, farming and research communities - has long championed the need for more proportionate, evidence-based regulation of new breeding technologies. Members of the Group first paved the way for post-Brexit regulatory reform on precision breeding by tabling an amendment to the Agriculture Act 2020, securing a ministerial commitment to bring forward new legislation.

APPGSTA Chair George Freeman MP said:

“Implementation of the Precision Breeding Act marks an important step in ensuring that farmers, consumers and the environment can benefit from advances in gene editing and other precision breeding techniques. From today we expect applications to come forward which will offer the potential to increase yields, reduce chemical inputs, enhance disease resistance, cut food waste and improve nutritional quality across a range of different crops.”

Mr Freeman said the new legislation puts England ahead of the rest of Europe, and aligns our rules with other innovation leaders including Australia, Japan, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and the USA.

“By pioneering a world-class, science-based framework, the UK is better placed to help improve prospects for global food security, reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from agriculture, and promote more sustainable farming systems across rapidly developing economies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Britain’s scientists and plant breeders now have the chance to help farmers here and overseas produce more from less.”

Mr Freeman also stressed that implementation of the Precision Breeding Act supports core elements of the government’s Food, Industrial and Trade & Investment Strategies.

“Improved access to precision breeding technologies such as gene editing opens up new opportunities for economic growth and global leadership,” he said. “These innovations can help improve the resilience of our domestic food supply, create new high-value export markets, attract inward investment and support Britain’s ambition to be a leader in green growth.”

The indications are that many early applications will come from public sector researchers and SMEs, reflecting one of the legislation’s key aims – to democratise access to new genetic technologies through a more proportionate, risk-based system. Similar approaches in countries such as Argentina have encouraged smaller developers and public institutions to lead on gene-editing innovation, broadening the range of crops and traits under development.

However, the Group cautioned that these hard-won gains must not be compromised in the context of forthcoming UK–EU realignment discussions and any future cross-border Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement.

“To secure future innovation and investment, the government must protect the independence of our science-based regulatory framework,” said Mr Freeman. “The UK must retain the freedom to pursue policies that promote food security, sustainability and innovation in our own agri-food system.”

While welcoming progress for plants, the All-Party Group also urged ministers to activate the Act’s farmed animal provisions without delay, noting that precision breeding advances could play a transformative role in tackling major disease threats in livestock, reducing the need for antibiotics and improving animal health, welfare and environmental outcomes.

Recent warnings from scientists at the UK’s Pirbright Institute that this season’s bird-flu strain could be the most contagious yet, alongside concerns previously raised by leading virologists that the virus could mutate towards a zoonotic pandemic in the human population - underline the urgency.

“As we heard at last week’s Agri-Science Summit at Westminster, UK researchers lead the world in using gene editing techniques to develop poultry resistant to bird flu and pigs protected against PRRS and swine fever. But that potential will remain unrealised in practice until the government brings forward the secondary legislation needed to activate these powers,” said Mr Freeman.

The All-Party Group has urged Defra to set a clear timetable for implementation of the farmed animal provisions, working with scientists, breeders, farmers and welfare organisations to ensure a robust and trusted regulatory process.

Looking ahead, Mr Freeman added that the entry into force of the Precision Breeding Act should mark the beginning of a new, pro-innovation agricultural policy agenda for the UK – one that fully embraces the power of science and technology to deliver a more sustainable, competitive and resilient food system.

As set out in the Group's recent call for a "30:50:50 mission" – to increase UK farm output by 30% by 2050 while cutting the environmental footprint of agriculture by 50% - there is an urgent need for radical policy reform across the entire agri-innovation ecosystem, from farming and land use policy to research funding, regulation, skills and farm data.

"The Precision Breeding Act offers a blueprint for UK leadership in science-based, sustainable agriculture," said Mr Freeman. "If we now apply the same enabling, evidence-led approach across the wider food and farming system, the UK can establish itself as a global testbed for agri-innovation – helping to deliver a secure food supply, stronger rural economies and genuine environmental gains."

ENDS

Notes to editors
At last week's Agri-Science Summit at Westminster (3 November), the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture (APPGSTA) warned that the UK government's targets for house building, nature restoration, renewable energy, tree planting, and infrastructure could result in the loss of up to a quarter of currently farmed land over the next 25 years. At current productivity growth rates, and without urgent policy reforms to enhance yields, domestic food production could decline by 32% by 2050. The All-Party Group is urging the government to embed its proposed 30:50:50 mission - increasing agricultural output by 30% by 2050 while reducing farming's environmental footprint by 50% - as a consistent, cross-departmental reference point across all food, farming and land use policies. The Group is also calling for the strategic importance of food security to be elevated alongside environmental goals of biodiversity and net zero, with a statutory target of 75% self-sufficiency by 2050, as outlined in its report *Feeding Britain sustainably to 2050 - the 30:50:50 mission*.

APPGSTA exists to promote debate among politicians and other stakeholders on the value and role of scientific innovation in UK agriculture. The Group works to ensure that the Government's support for agri-science is maintained and strengthened, that the regulatory environment is evidence-based and enabling, and that the contribution of modern agriculture to our society, economy and environment is valued and understood as widely as possible.

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